Mata Hari With a Clockwork Eye, Alligators in the Sewer By GEORGE PLIMPTON

New York Times (1857-Current file); Apr 21, 1963;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2006)

pg. BR3

## Mata Hari With a Clockwork Eye, Alligators in the Sewer

V. By Thomas Pynchon. 492 pp. Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company. \$5.95.

By GEORGE PLIMPTON

INCE the war a category of the American novel has been developed by a number of writers: American picaresque one might call the archetype, and its more notable practitioners would include Saul Bellow with "The Adventures of Augie March," Jack Kerouac, "On the Road," Joseph Heller, "Catch-22," Clancy Sigal, "Going Away," and Harry Mathews, who last fall produced a generally overlooked though brilliant novel entitled "Conversions." The genus is distinguished by what the word "picaresque" implies—the doings of a character or characters completely removed from socio-political attachments, thus on the loose, and, above all, uncommitted.

Such novels are invariably lengthy, heavily populated with eccentrics, deviates, grotesques with funny names (so they can be remembered), and are usually composed of a series of bizarre adventures or episodes in which the central character is involved, then removed and flung abruptly into another. Very often a Quest is incorporated, which keeps the central character on the move.

For the author, the form of the picaresque is convenient: he can string together the short stories he has at hand (publishers are reluctant to publish short-story collections, which would suggest the genre is perhaps a type of compensation.) Moreover—the made, the realistic not being his concern—the author can afford to take chances, to be excessive, even prolix, knowing that in a work of great length stretches of doubtful value can be excused. The author can tell his favorite jokes, throw in a song, indulge in a fantasy or

Mr. Plimpton is editor of The Paris Review.

so, include his own verse, display an intimate knowledge of such disparate subjects as physics, astronomy, art, jazz, how a nose-job is done, the wildlife in the New York sewage system. These indeed are some of the topics which constitute a recent and remarkable example of the genre: a brilliant and turbulent first novel published this month by a young Cornell graduate, Thomas Pynchon. He calls his book "V."

"V" has two main characters. One of them is Benny Profane -on the loose in New York City following a Navy hitch and a spell as a road-laborer. Born in 1932, Profane is Depressionformed, and his function in the novel is to perfect his state of "schlemihlhood"—that is to say being the victim, buffeted by circumstance and not caring to do much about it-resigned to being behind the 8-ball. Indeed, in one poolroom fracas the 8ball rolls up to Profane, prostrate on the floor, and stares him in the eye. His friends are called the Whole Sick Crew, a fine collection of disaffected about whom one observer says "there is not one you can point to and say is well." Typical of them is the itinerant artist Slab, who calls himself a catatonic expressionist. Beset by a curious block he can only paint cheese danishes-Cheese Danish No. 56 is his subject at one stage of the book.

Profane tags along with these oddballs through a series of episodes, mostly punctuated by drinking bouts, one of them a notable chapter in which he joins a patrol in the sewers to kill alligators grown big, blind and albino from 50-cent Macy pets finally flushed down the city drains by bored children.

Profane does not take easily to the idea of the alligator chase: it is an active course not consistent with the passivity of schlemihlhood. Even though aimless enough (one of the pleasures of the Whole Sick

Crew is to ride the subway endlessly up and down the West Side, a process called "yo-yoing"), Profane's true affinity is with an artfully constructed mannequin he discovers in the research department of a factory where he is a temporary nightwatchman. "Shock," this figure is called, used for tests in auto wrecks, entirely lifelike -a blood reservoir set in its thorax-to be propped up in the death seat of aged cars and subjected to crashes . . . a personification of the inert, the true inanimate schlemihl.

ET in contrast to Profane is a young adventurer named, Stencil. He is active as opposed to passive, obsessed by a selfimposed duty which he follows, somewhat joylessly-a Quest to discover the identity of V., a woman's initial which occurs in the journals of his father, a British Foreign Office man, drowned in a waterspout off Malta. The search for V., a puzzle slowly fitted together by a series of brilliant episodic flashbacks, provides the unifying device of the novel - a framework encompassing a considerable panorama of history and character. V., turning up first as a young girl in Cairo at the start of the century, reappears under various names and guises, invariably at times of strife and riot, in Florence, Paris, Malta, South Africa. Finally one finds her disguised as a Manichaean priest, trapped under a beam in a World War II bombing raid on Malta and being literally disassembled by a crowd of children.

V. is obsessed with collecting on herself bits of inert matter: she has a star sapphire sewn into her navel; she has two artificial feet made of gold, an artificial left eye, the works of a watch. She (as one of the children remarks) actually comes apart, and one immediately compares her to Profane's

auto-crash mannequin. One can speculate that both Profane (consciously) and Stencil (unconsciously) seek in their respective manner the symbol of inertness, and that Pynchon's novel can be described as a voluble explication of the deathwish. Perhaps.

The identity of V., what her many guises are meant to suggest, will cause much speculation. What will be remembered, whether or not V. remains elusive, is Pynchon's remarkable ability—which includes a vigorous and imaginative style, a robust humor, a tremendous reservoir of information (one suspects that he could churn out a passable almanac in a fortnight's time) and, above all,

a sense of how to use and balance these talents. True, in a plan as complicated and varied as a Hieronymous Bosch triptych, sections turn up which are dull—the author backing and filling, shuffling the pieces of his enormous puzzle to no effect—but these stretches are far fewer than one might expect.

Pynchon is in his early twenties; he writes in Mexico City—a recluse. It is hard to find out anything more about him. At least there is at hand a testament—this first novel "V."—which suggests that no matter what his circumstances, or where he's doing it, there is at work a young writer of staggering promise.



Sculpture by William King. Collection Armand G. Erpf. Courtesy Terry Dintenfass, Inc.
"A state of 'schlemihlhood."